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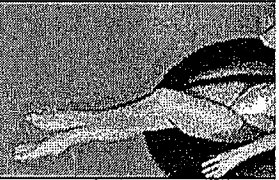
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Graduates of alcohol treatment program ready to start new lives

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12 go at least 6 months sober

By Pauline Repard

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

June 5, 2003

One of the best things about being sober for almost a year, Dennis Mayne said, "is waking up without a hangover."

Paul Bacon said he "just wanted to get out of jail."

Thomas O'Keefe was tired of cops hassling him on the streets.

These men, as chronic drunks, decided to change their lives when a judge offered them six months in jail or six months in an alcohol treatment program.

Last night, the three were among 12 graduates of the Serial Inebriate Program honored at the War Memorial Building in Balboa Park for living at least six months sober. Some have gone longer. Some now have jobs, cars and their own apartments for the first time in decades.

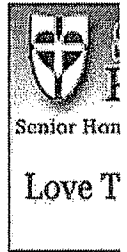
Graduate Vincent Nalley said he had to shift his thinking.

"I thought it would take something miraculous or complicated to get out of what I was in," Nalley told a crowd of about 120, including his sister from Sonoma County. "I wasn't willing to do the work."

After more than 250 arrests around the country, racking up 15 years behind bars, Nalley has stayed sober for a year and recently earned a computer technology certification.

In his nine years with the San Diego Police Department, Officer John Liening had seen too many men like Nalley on his beat.

"People were dying left and right on the street," Liening said in an interview. "Some people would go to the hospital emergency room 10 times a week, 10 times a weekend. They would get drunk, fall down, the



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paramedics would take them to the ER. Paramedics were sick of dealing with them."

Superior Court Commissioner Sandra Berry, the ceremony's keynote speaker, said a local study showed that 227 homeless inebriates had cost about \$6 million in health care on some 2,358 hospital visits and 1,745 paramedic ambulance rides between January 1999 and July 2001.

In 1999, Liening, with Officer Juan Cephas and patrol Sgt. Richard Schnell approached the county Alcohol and Drug Services division to try something new. With the support of the courts, City Attorney's Office, hospitals and one private alcohol treatment facility, a pilot Serial Inebriate Program was launched in January 2000 to offer chronic drunks a choice.

Liening said San Diego's population of homeless serial drunks hovers around 250. About half try SIP, and half of those complete a six-month treatment.

There are now about 22 SIP clients in 10 treatment facilities around the county, with dozens more still considered active cases. The county pays for the treatment and two counselors work with Liening, who is assigned full time to SIP.

Michelle Berkman, the only woman to graduate last night and only the second woman in the program, said she hopes her success brings in more women. She said a judge threatened her with a year in jail if she didn't seek help.

"I made the choice, and I made the right decision," Berkman said. "If I'd done the year, I'd be back in there. I'd been on the streets off and on since age 13. I have come a long way."

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